

Colonial Rivalries, 1870 - 1914

I

Colonialisation prior to 1870

With the exception of India, the British were never wholly convinced that an empire was a good thing. For example, an 1865 Parliamentary Report advised that Britain should pull out of West Africa. The colonies increasingly demanded self-government. Economic arguments in favour of colonies were not strong. Britain did more trade with America after Independence than before. Nonetheless the British empire continued to grow - Singapore, Aden, Hong Kong and Lagos were acquired. Australia and New Zealand became colonies. India was always regarded as the 'jewel in the crown'. It was largely self-financing. British imperialism was not just one of military conquest. Economic and naval supremacy were very important in establishing it, especially in China, Latin America and the Persian Gulf.

French imperialism was a quest for prestige. Their centres of interest were Algeria, Indo-China and West Africa. The Russians expanded into Asia. They captured Tashkent and Bokhara, thus gaining control of most of Turkestan by the 1860s. This threatened Afghanistan and consequently India.

Regarding the colonialisation of Africa, it is now accepted that the Europeans did not shape a merely passive Africa to their will. Whilst Victorians saw Africa as a 'Dark Continent', this is not true. In fact, many Europeans inter-bred with Africans, especially in West Africa. During 1815 to 1870 the French control of Algeria was established. Tunisia, Egypt and Tripoli were increasingly under European influence, despite being nominally under Turkish suzerainty. The Boers extended settlements in South Africa outside British control. In the 1850s the British recognised the Transvaal and The Orange Free State as independent republics. The British regarded Cape Colony as of strategic importance, securing routes to India. Within Africa there was a complex series of events, with jihads or holy wars in the northerly parts of West Africa and Zulu despotism in Southern Africa, making the Europeans seem almost allies to displaced tribes. There was evasion of the law against the abolition of slavery, and there was considerable trade between Europe and Africa. East Africa traded mainly with Arabia and India, with the island of Zanzibar acting as a trading centre. The Sahara divided North African states, which were more closely linked to Europe from the rest of Africa. Foreign debt in Tunisia and Egypt made these countries open to European influence. Africans did not meet with Europeans on equal terms. The Europeans were clearly dominant.



There was also the issue of the left over empires from previous periods of colonialisation – those of Portugal and Spain. Spain lost most of her empire after her defeat by the US in 1898. Cuba became independent and the Philippines came under American control. Spain still had a large part of Morocco. The Netherlands had a huge empire in South-East Asia. Austria-Hungary, being preoccupied with the conflict of nationalities within its borders, did not take part in the scramble for colonies.

II

The Partition of Africa

There was a “scramble for Africa”. Africa was partitioned between 1880 and 1900. In 1880 only $\frac{1}{10}^{\text{th}}$ was colonised; by 1900 only $\frac{1}{10}^{\text{th}}$ remained under African rule. However, the effects of this should not be exaggerated; by 1905 few Africans had seen a white man. In the 1880s partition amounted to little than drawing lines on a map. In the 1890s there was serious consolidation and conquest, usually with the help of friendly tribes, or by granting powers to Chartered Companies.

The British Empire

From 1879 to 1886 there was extensive colonial rivalry, with Britain centrally involved. France clashed with Italy when a French protectorate was asserted over Tunisia in 1881-82. In 1869 the opening of the Suez Canal made Egypt strategically important, and by extension, Central and East Africa became important to Britain. This in turn made British politicians anxious to prevent expansion by other European powers into areas adjacent to British territory. In 1878 Egypt was declared bankrupt and Dual Control of Egypt under Britain & France was established. The ruler Khedive was deposed when he plotted against dual control. An army officer, Arabi Pasha, then led the nationalist movement. When Suez seemed threatened, the British sent a force which defeated Pasha in 1882. Britain then started an occupation of Egypt, which lasted 40 years. The French wanted Britain to withdraw from Egypt. There was a revolt in Egyptian Sudan, and although this was quelled, it sent Egypt into another financial crisis. France and Russia opposed Britain at the subsequent international conference, and Britain needing German support, conceded colonies elsewhere in Africa. French intervention in Africa provoked a response from Britain, which made alliances with local tribal chiefs as a result. The British declared a protectorate over Niger in 1885.

The Italians sought to extend their influence over Ethiopia and Eritrea, but in 1896 they were defeated by the Ethiopians at the battle of Adowa. Thus in 1896 the British agreed



to relieve pressure on the Italians by sending a force under Kitchener into the Sudan. At the same time, the French sent a force under Captain Marchand - aiming to reinforce French demands for a British withdrawal from Egypt. The French occupied Fashoda. The British demanded unconditional withdrawal, which was agreed to by the French in November 1898. There was conflict between Britain and France in West Africa, with French expansion from Senegal running up against British expansion northwards.

After 1900 there was a definite improvement in Anglo-French relations, partly as a response to the failure of Britain and Germany to conclude an alliance. Britain and France were able to reach agreement over specific details, and these led to the Anglo-French entente cordial of 1904, and to the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907. The entente cordial allowed Britain a free-hand in Egypt in return for the promise of British support in the event of a French move into Morocco. It cleared up a number of other disputes.

Some thought the British empire would develop into a world-wide English-speaking trade federation. Joseph Chamberlain was Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1895 to 1905 and particularly favoured this view. But the commitment to free trade prevented the adoption of a preferential tariff for trade within the empire. India posed the moral issue of whether one race should govern others. However, in the late C19th the majority of Britons believed Britain had the right to govern other races. Most middle-class families had at least one relative in the Indian administration or army. There was also a good deal of British investment in India. 40% of cotton goods exported from Lancashire went to India. So British foreign policy centred around the need to secure the trade routes to India. The British commitment to empire was reflected in the very pro-empire flavour of the celebrations in 1897 of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The piecemeal expansion of the British empire meant that by 1905 the colonies had a population of 345m whereas Britain itself had a population of 40.5m.

The Boers are the descendants of Dutch settlers in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. The British recognised their independence in 1881 and 1884, but the Boer war was fought over the refusal of the Boers to permit the exploitation of their rich gold and diamond mines.

The French Empire in Africa

In 1881 the French established a protectorate over Tunisia. In 1912 they used the pretext of disturbances on the Algerian border to justify involvement in Morocco. The French had an ambitious plan to link Senegal, Algeria and Upper Niger by a railway, but this did not happen and the economic benefits were very doubtful. During the 1880s and 1890s the French colonial army created a huge empire in West Africa.



French colonialism was based on an assumption that French subjects in Africa or Asia could be turned into Frenchmen. Thus the French left a deeper cultural mark on their colonies.

The Belgian Congo

The Belgian king, Leopold, sought to profit personally from The Congo, although he pretended that this was a scientific and humanitarian scheme. To this effect, he set up an International Association in 1877, which provoked rivalry from France. Britain countered by supporting Portugal's claims in the area. This led to an international conference at Berlin held between November 1884 and February 1885, which laid down the 'ground rules' for partition. It required powers to be in 'effective occupation' of the territory and to be more precise about claims.

German expansion into Africa

There was commercial rivalry between British and German businessmen from 1890 onwards. German businessmen started to trade in East Africa. Germany made formal claims to Togo, the Cameroons, German East Africa, and South West Africa. By asserting a claim to South West Africa in August 1884 the Germans were involving Southern Africa in great power rivalries. In 1886 gold was discovered in Transvaal. The prosperity in the Transvaal threatened Cape Colony's dominance. Cecil Rhodes countered by extending British rule to Rhodesia, obtaining a Royal Charter for his British South Africa Company to administer it in October 1889. There was rivalry between Germany and Britain over East Africa resulting in a partition agreement in 1886 in which Germany supported British claims for Egypt in return for recognition of their claims in East Africa. But in 1890 Germany traded Zanzibar for Heligoland, which was advantageous to Britain.

The Italian adventure

The possession of colonies became a matter of national prestige to Italy rather than a question of national interest or economic advantage. Italian Prime Minister, Crispi, called the colonies "a necessity of modern life". Italian foreign policy was dictated by jealousy of France. They built a substantial navy and conducted a tariff war against France. In 1882 the Triple Alliance was formed between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. In 1882 the Italians acquired African territory along the Red Sea. In 1885 they occupied Massawa and gave this province the name of Eritrea (which is Latin for "Red Sea"). In 1893 Emperor Merelik of Ethiopia denounced his agreement with Italy. The Italian army attacked, but suffered defeat in 1896 at Andowa. Merelik captured 2,000 Italian prisoners. This led to the fall of Crispi's government, but it created the motive for Italian revenge for Andowa. In 1911 the Italians seized Libya.



After 1900

In Southern Africa worsening relations with the Boers made the British seek German goodwill. The British made an agreement with Germany over the future division of Portuguese colonies. It was thought financial crisis in Portugal would force Portugal to give up Mozambique and Angola. The Boer War (1899-1902) directed European public opinion against Britain. But after 1900 Africa was not an important region of conflict between the great powers. The scramble for Africa was a quest for political influence and economic factors were secondary. Many African acquisitions were unprofitable.

III

China and the Far East

Rivalry between the Great Powers over China

In China British dominance started to diminish by the 1890s. Russia expanded eastwards. The trans-Siberian railway was completed in 1902. Russia was arguably the most successful colonising power. During the 19th century Russia expanded eastward and took over Moslem and pagan tribes in the region. In 1898 Russia occupied Port Arthur, which was an all-weather naval base in the Far East.

Japan defeated China in 1895. France, Germany and Russia intervened to protect the integrity of the Chinese empire. After 1895 the Far East became the centre of great power rivalry. Other European powers sought to challenge Britain's domination of trade with China. The crisis lasted from Japan's defeat of China in 1895 to Japan's victory over Russia in 1905. After 1895 there was a 'scramble for concessions' in China, and it seemed China might be partitioned. In order to limit Russian influence the British signed an alliance with Japan in 1902, which effectively ended Britain's foreign policy of "splendid isolation".

In 1904 there was the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese war, which was fought over control of Korea. Russia's defeat created internal unrest and led to the 1905 Revolution within Russia. The 1905 defeat of Russia by Japan removed the threat of Russia in the Far East, and paved the way for an agreement between Britain and Russia in August 1907. This ensured the neutrality of Tibet and the withdrawal of the British mission there. Afghanistan was recognised as falling within the British sphere of influence. Persia was maintained as an independent state, and divided into Russian and British zones of influence. After the 1905 defeat the Russians hoped for expansion in the Balkans.



Britain, France and Germany had no strategic interests in China; their concerns were economic - although trade was not brisk, the potential market of 400m was enticing. There were also investment opportunities - even in 1880 China had no railways, and there was rivalry among European firms for mining and railway 'concessions'. In reality, the conflict was probably motivated by the desire for political prestige. However, Russia sought political control over Manchuria, which would give them economic control of the region. In response Japan underwent modernisation. By the 1890s she had a modern navy and army. In 1894 Japan claimed Korea from China and defeated China in the ensuing war. The Russians forced Japan to moderate their demands and at the same time extended their economic control over Manchuria. China became dependent on foreign loans. The French concentrated on South China, next to their Indo-China colony. Britain was predominant in central China and here her interests often clashed with Germany.

However, China was not partitioned. The reasons why are: (1) it had a dynasty and was a single state. (2) The Chinese prevented spheres of influence developing by the way they granted concessions. (3) They permitted trade at over 30 treaty ports, thus political control was not essential for trade. (4) The only regions worth controlling were Manchuria and Yangtze. (5) The British were reluctant to add yet a further colonial responsibility to the responsibility for India. (6) The British actively pursued the American policy of the 'Open Door' and negotiated with rivals to give up spheres of influence.

The Boxer Rebellion

In 1900 there was the "Boxer rebellion" in Northern China which led to a siege lasting 7 weeks of European embassies in Peking. An international force retook Peking, which was pillaged. All the European powers and Japan contributed contingents to suppress the rebellion, and the French even agreed to serve under a German general for this purpose. The Germans seized Kiaochow, and the Russians took Port Arthur. The British took Wei-hai-wei. Since the railway system in Manchuria had been damaged, the Russians deployed many troops in the area. This threatened to create Russian control of Peking. The British sought German cooperation and thought they had it when in October 1900 the Germans signed an Agreement on China. But in March 1901 the Germans declared that Manchuria was not covered in the agreement. This forced Britain to sign the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902. In February 1904 the Japanese attacked Russia in the Far East and gained decisive victories in 1905. In fact, after this the Far East was no longer a source of rivalry. Whereas in Africa imperialism took the form of acquisition of land, in China it was economically motivated. However, it often appeared to be a battle for prestige.



French Indo-China

In 1858 the French invaded Annam, and thereafter Cochin-China, Tongking (that is, Viet-Nam). Combined with Cambodia, these were formed into French Indo-China in 1887. However, the French were “torn between desire for empire and the desire for revenge in Europe for the defeat of 1870.” In 1885 the defeat of a French army in Indo-China caused the fall of the government of Jules Ferry. There was a public reaction against the empire. But for the French the empire did provide lucrative investment opportunities, and also opportunities for glory in the field.

IV

Explanations for Imperialism

Marxist interpretations and replies

J. A. Hobson's conspiracy thesis, written in 1902, argues that financiers promoted imperialism and hoisted it on to the public for their own benefit. He wrote, “the modern foreign policy of Great Britain is primarily a struggle for profitable markets for investment.” However, Hobson's thesis is not widely held since most of Britain's surplus capital went to India, America and Australia. But Platt and Hynes more recently do support the theory of ‘economic imperialism’. As a result of industrialisation in Germany and France there was over-supply of manufactures. The ‘Great Depression’ of 1873-96 saw a contraction of world-wide demand and hence there was increasing competition. Germany and France became protectionist, but Britain held on to Free Trade. The French made significant tariff increases in the 1890s.

Lenin in *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) advances the communist analysis of economic relations; he claims that financial institutions, finding it difficult to invest profitably at home force the European powers to expand abroad so as to create new industrial markets and new investment opportunities. The quest for raw materials was crucial to such monopoly power. The rivalry was so intense that it would inevitably lead to war.

In reply it is notably that investments in other industrial countries by the colonial powers were still more important. British investments in North America exceeded by far her investments in Africa. French investments in Russia exceeded by twice French investments in her colonies. European trade and investment in Africa was only a small percentage of total trade and investment. For example, in 1914 Britain invested £1780 million in Canada, Australia and India, but only £ 37 million in West Africa. Lenin also



dates the appearance of 'monopoly finance capitalism' at 1900, so this cannot be used to explain colonial expansion before 1900.

However, Kempt, a modern Marxist historian, still links imperialism to capitalism. Furthermore, trade cannot be discounted since there is evidence that British involvement in Africa stemmed from a strategic concern to protect British trade, and colonialisation stemmed from a fear that Britain would be prevented from trading in French and German colonies. Likewise, one reason why Bismarck became interested in colonies was due to pressure from German merchants.

Another explanation for imperialism comes from A.J.P. Taylor, who argues the European power politics exported tensions - playing out European rivalries on the international stage. There was also 'preclusive' imperialism in which a power takes over a territory to prevent another power doing so. Imperialism also served to increase prestige. During the 1890s public opinion was strongly behind imperialism. The daily press encouraged 'Jingoism' Social Darwinism, the idea of the survival of the "fittest" nations, was also very influential. In Britain, for example, Joseph Chamberlain subscribed to it. He regarded Britain as 'the greatest of governing races the world has ever seen'.

Contemporary justifications

There was also missionary zeal. Livingstone is reputed to have said that "Christianity, commerce, civilisation went hand in hand." On the other hand, a lot of this was sheer humbug. For example, the Belgians were notorious for their brutality in the Congo Free State, but the original enterprise was given a philanthropic title by King Leopold II, who called it *Comité d'Etudes du Haut Congo*.

The advocates of imperialism at the time also claimed to believe in "the white man's burden" – the idea that some races can be regarded as superior to others, and therefore have a duty, a "burden", to govern them.

There were also contemporary Darwinian type justifications for imperialism. Herbert Spencer used the phrase "survival of the fittest". He maintained that an excess of population necessitated a constant struggle for survival. The fittest nations win and were through victory morally entitled to rule other nations. Count Joseph-Arthur Gobineau, a Frenchman, in 1853 wrote an *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races*, advancing the view that "the most important factor in development was race; and that those races which remained superior were those which kept their racial purity intact." He advances the idea of the Aryan race. This had an influence on Wagner. Wagner's son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, published his *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899). Written in German this book advances the theory that Jesus was not a Jew. It is notably that Hitler visited Chamberlain on his deathbed in 1927.



The Scramble for Africa

Robinson and Gallagher defend the 'classic' thesis that Africa was strategically important to Britain as it secured the route to India. They specifically argue that British occupation of Egypt in 1882 triggered rivalry in West Africa, but this is not sound since rivalry in West Africa predates the Egyptian crisis. The claim that rivalry over the Congo triggered the scramble for Africa is more convincing, since this also involved Germany and it was the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884-85 that laid the ground rules for partition. Sanderson notes that up to 1870 Britain had informal influence in Africa south of the Sahara, but after the 1880s this was contested. When Britain agreed to the West Africa Congress this signalled that Africa was open for partition. This imperialism arose in part through reactions to local crisis and changing circumstances within Africa itself. For example, British intervention in Egypt was triggered by nationalism within Egypt and was ostensibly to defend Suez. Thus the partition arose partly from the interaction of Africans and Europeans.

V

Colonial Rivalries and International Relations

Excepting the crisis in Bulgaria during 1885-87 international tension during 1884 to 1904 was diverted from Europe to Africa and the Far East. Russia's defeat in 1905 by Japan signalled the end of Russia's expansion in Asia and made Germany stronger in Europe. Thus Anglo-French and Anglo-Russian relations improved. From 1884 to 1904 Britain and France frequently clashed over Africa and often came close to war. Likewise, Russian pressure on regions adjacent to India during the 1870s and 1880s alarmed Britain. In 1892-94 the Franco-Russian Alliance seemed anti-British in intent. The conflict over Egypt brought Britain and France to the brink of war. After Britain invaded Egypt in 1882 they refused to renew the Dual Control Agreement with France for government in Egypt. The French wanted the British to pull out of Egypt but the British became determined to stay. Tension was at its peak in the Fashoda incident and in 1898 Britain was prepared to go to war. Nonetheless, the French realised that they should trade Egypt for Morocco, and this was the basis of the 1904 entente between Britain and France. Thereafter, by 1914 Anglo-French co-operation over colonial matters and their collaboration against Germany in response to the Moroccan crises (First Moroccan crisis, 1905; second, 1911) meant that their relationship was effectively an alliance.

For Germany Africa was a bargaining chip to be played in defence of her European interests. But this could backfire on Germany. The British resented Germany using Egypt as a bargaining chip for concessions in Europe. German backing for the Boers



caused further resentment. The clumsy German handling of the Moroccan crises in 1905 and 1911 were further attempts by Germany to secure concessions in Europe rather than colonial gains. Britain resisted Russian expansion in Manchuria, during 1901. Britain interpreted German seizure of Kiaochow as a favourable sign that Germany would adopt an active policy in the far East, but this proved to be wrong and led to Britain's alliance with Japan in 1902. It has been argued that this alliance marked the end of Britain's policy of 'Splendid Isolation'. However, A.J.P. Taylor claims that the alliance was limited to the Far East. In reply it can be argued that the Anglo-Japanese alliance accelerated the process of the Anglo-French entente, since Britain did not want to be embroiled in a war with France as a result of France being an ally of Russia. Russia's defeat by Japan in 1905 weakened Russia and left her unable to participate fully in international affairs. Germany sought to gain from this in the Moroccan crisis and in the 1908-9 Bosnia affair. Russia's defeat in the Far East caused her to focus on the Balkans again. The effect of 1905 was to bring the centre of international relations back to Europe.

